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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: VP BIDEN'S VISIT/SPEECH PLEASES EVERYBODY
- ALMOST

¶1. (SBU) Summary/Comment. The Vice President's two-day trip to Tbilisi received extensive coverage by the Georgian press and elicited an overwhelmingly positive response from ruling party and opposition politicians, the media, and Georgian political analysts alike. VP Biden's speech at the Georgian Parliament and meeting with young people from the IDP community at the Youth Palace received the most attention and were broadcast live and replayed during the day. Many welcomed the Vice President's "historic" address to Parliament and interpreted his frank statements relating to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian territorial integrity, and NATO membership as a firm stand against Russia's perceived nefarious intentions in the region. The high hopes and expectations harbored by many Georgians before the visit were met, and in many cases exceeded. End Summary/Comment.

VP VISIT HUGE SUCCESS

¶2. (SBU) VP Biden's July 23 speeches at the Parliament and Youth Palace dominate Georgian headlines, while his discussion with civil society and opposition leaders on July 23 and his remarks at a banquet at the Presidential Palace on July 22 also received significant press coverage. The Vice President set the tone for the visit at the President's Palace the first night, where he expressed his intent to send an "unequivocal, clear, simple message to all who will listen and some who don't want to listen, that America stands with you and will continue to stand" with Georgia. Saakashvili called the visit historic and awarded the Vice President the St. George's Victory Order, Georgia's most prestigious award for foreigners, for his continued support of Georgia. In a meeting with ruling party MPs a day after the visit, Saakashvili said that it's clear that "Georgia has won serious diplomatic victories and that Russia is not a local, but a global problem, and that Georgia is not alone." Saakashvili noted that the short-term outcome of the visit is that Putin's plan to fully occupy Georgia has been foiled.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS AT IDP MEETING

¶3. (SBU) The Vice President's conversations with IDP children at the Youth Palace on July 23 evoked a particularly emotional response in Tbilisi. After listening to several tragic stories from the children, VP Biden shared his own personal tragedy of losing his wife and young daughter in a car crash in 1972. The Vice President was hailed for the compassion and sincerity he expressed, which deeply resonated with his Georgian audience. After the meeting, Saakashvili rhetorically told "Russianites" (those who are pro-Russian in their foreign policy orientation), "You have seen Biden's meeting with IDP children. Which Russian official could have spoken like that? Who could have demonstrated such humanity and such ability to share your concerns?"

PARLIAMENT SPEECH EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS

14. (SBU) While most Georgians anticipated a reaffirmation of U.S. support for Georgia, the Vice President's straightforward address to the Georgian Parliament on July 23 overwhelmingly exceeded their expectations. Georgian political analysts characterized VP Biden's speech as confirmation of U.S. support for Georgia's independence and territorial integrity. Analysts Kakha Gogolashvili and Zurab Abashidze noted that the Vice President voiced several key messages to Russia, the most important being that the United States rejects the notion of spheres of influence.

15. (SBU) Government officials were particularly pleased with the speech. Saakashvili called the address "truly historic and very inspirational. I was moved frankly." Speaker of Parliament David Bakradze, who introduced the Vice President, remarked, "(w)hat we have heard today has exceeded all our expectations. The speech was extremely sincere, emotional, and none of the topics were avoided. The main signal of the speech was that Georgia will never become hostage of any other policies. Of course behind closed doors there was discussion of the concrete components of the declared position, such as security and defense capability, de-occupation, economic cooperation, and democratic reforms. It was clear that Biden has taken Georgia's problems very close to his heart." Georgian Ambassador to the United States Batu Kutelia stated that, "(t)his has been an unprecedented address in Georgia's recent history, as very clear support has been stated." Deputy Foreign Minister Nino Kalandadze commented, "I did not expect that he would state the position of full support so clearly." Minister of Culture Nik Rurua joined Saakashvili in assessing the address as "historic", while Education Minister Nika Gvaramia noted that "Biden pointed out that Georgia set an example to the

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civilized world." Vice Prime Minister and State Minister for European Integration Giorgi Baramidze said, "(t)he key message was just what we had expected to hear, that the United States will never abandon Georgia in hard times...and that the sovereignty and territorial integrity are in the interests of the U.S. government." Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava described the visit as a signal for investors that Georgia is a stable country.

PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION ALSO IMPRESSED

16. (SBU) Opposition MP Giorgi Targamadze, leader of Christian-Democratic Movement and the parliamentary minority, attended the dinner at the Presidential Palace, and speech at Parliament, as well Biden's meeting with civil society and opposition leaders. He remarked, "(a)fter meeting with Vice President Biden I understood what kind of people America's founding fathers were" and called Biden "one of the most far-sighted and wise politicians we have ever seen." Targamadze stated that "the U.S. is not personalizing its politics and supports development of democratic institutions. The U.S. thinks that Georgia is the leader in terms of developing democracy in the region. Therefore, our responsibility in front of the people, the future, and the region has doubled." MP Gia Chakhvadze (National-Democratic Party) stated, "It is clear that we have foreign policy support. Now the thing is to build democracy at home." MP Gia Tortladze (Unified Opposition) commented, "It is clear that the U.S. is the closest partner to us."

NON-PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION SATISFIED

17. (SBU) Non-parliamentary opposition leaders Irakli Alasania (Our Georgia-Free Democrats), Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement-United Georgia), and Levan Gachechiladze assessed their meeting with VP Biden and civil society representatives as important, frank, and satisfactory. Alasania noted, "(w)e had an open discussion of Georgia's internal political situation and security. We gave him

detailed information on the current situation and received a promise that the democratic reforms in Georgia will be the defining factor in Georgian-U.S. relations. The future bilateral strategic cooperation will be based on Georgia's progress in democratic reforms." Burjanadze stated, "I am really very satisfied... We had a very sincere and open meeting. There were no recommendations, which truly underlines the fact that the U.S. is a democratic country and is our friend. There were assessments. The Vice President stated clearly that elections and decisions like that are the internal matters of the Georgian people. The U.S. is not going to interfere in Georgia's internal affairs. It was stated clearly that it is the Georgian people and the Georgian state which have the support of the U.S. and not concrete individuals." Gachechiladze reported, "(w)e had an exchange of opinions and two issues were stated: first, it is the matter of Georgian people who will be their president and when elections will be held. Second, if Georgia does not take steps toward freedom, human rights, and democracy, there will be no U.S. assistance." All three opposition leaders declined invitations to attend Biden's speech at Parliament. Burjanadze and Gachechiladze commented that their absence was a sign of unity with fellow non-parliamentary opposition leaders who were not invited.

SOME WILL NEVER BE HAPPY

18. (SBU) Sergey Shamba, Abkhaz de facto foreign minister, commented that "(w)e can exist without U.S. recognition very well. As a politician I know that there are words, and there are deeds. Americans can speak about Georgia's territorial integrity as much as they like, but they will not fight for Georgians and we will continue defending our country. VP Biden's visit was only to please the Georgian government." TEFFT